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ABSTRACT

The intention of mixed-age grouping in early childhood settings is to increase the heterogeneity of the group so as to capitalize on the differences in the experience, knowledge, and abilities of the children. One of the benefits of mixed-age groups is that they provide a context in which older children's dispositions to nurture can be strengthened. Other benefits relate to ways of learning. Whereas single-age groups create pressures on children and teachers to expect the same knowledge and skills from all children, in groups of children with a wide age span, the range of behavior and performance likely to be accepted is wider. Results of experiments in which children worked in same-age or mixed-age groups of three have shown that in the latter, older children spontaneously facilitated other children's behavior. In a single-age triad, however, the same children became domineering. Mixed-age groups also provide social and intellectual benefits. In mixed-age groups, younger children are capable of contributing to far more complex activities than they could working by themselves. Both older and younger children benefit from discussions centering on tasks which one understands better than the other. Along with these benefits, there are risks related to mixed-age groups. Younger children might be overwhelmed or pestered by older children, or older children might gloat over their superior skills. Teachers can alleviate these risks by encouraging children to turn to each other for explanations and comfort, showing younger children how to protect themselves, and encouraging older children to read to or write down text for younger children. (BC)

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The Benefits of Mixed-Age Grouping

Lilian G. Katz

Goodlad and Anderson, who introduced the modern notion of the non-graded elementary school in 1959, raised our awareness of the fact that age is a crude indicator of what learning experiences children are ready for. Implementation of Goodlad and Anderson's ideas originally consisted largely of organizing children in groups by ability rather than by age, thereby homogenizing groups in a different way! We have come to understand that the benefits of mixed-age grouping rest on the assumption that the differences within a group of children can be a source of rich intellectual and social benefits. The terms "ungraded" and "nongraded" used by Goodlad and Anderson suggest what we do *not* do in mixed-age settings—separate children into grade groups by age—but they fail to describe what we try *to* do. That may be better conveyed by the use of the term "mixed-age grouping." A mixed-age group of children in which the children's age range is larger than a year—sometimes two years and sometimes more—is intended to optimize the educative potential of the mixture itself.

Although humans are not usually born in litters, we seem to insist that they be educated in them. The time that children spend in groups in schools and child care centers, particularly for preschoolers, amounts to replacing families and spontaneous neighborhood groups as contexts for child-to-child interaction for large portions of children's waking hours. More and more children are deprived of the information and models of competencies that once were available to them in natural mixed-age groups. The intention of mixed-age grouping in early childhood settings is to increase the heterogeneity of the group so as to capitalize on the differences in the experience, knowledge, and abilities of the children.

Opportunity to Nurture

When we ask a five-year-old to be tolerant of a four-year-old's first fumbling efforts to put on his or her jacket, or a six-year-old to be appreciative of a five-year-old's early efforts to read, we have the beginnings of parent education. Our young children need real contexts in which their dispositions to be nurturing can be manifested and strengthened. Furthermore, the young children who are encouraged, comforted and nurtured by older children will be able to emulate their older classmates when they themselves become the older ones in a group. Children need opportunities not only to observe and imitate a wide range of competencies, but also to find companions among their peers who match, complement, or supplement their interests in different ways.

Ways of Learning

Single-age groups seem to create enormous normative pressures on the children and the teacher to expect all the children to possess the same knowledge and skills. There is a tendency in a homogeneous age group to penalize the children who fail to meet normative expectations. There is no evidence to show that a group of children who are all within a twelve-month age range can be expected to learn the same things, in the same way, on the same day, at the same time. The wide range of knowledge and skills that exists among children within a single-age group suggests that whole-group instruction, if overused, may not best serve children's learning.

On the other hand, the wider the age span in a group, the wider the range of behavior and performance likely to be accepted and tolerated by the adults as well as by the children themselves. In a mixed-age group, a teacher is more likely to address differences, not only between children but within each individual child. In a mixed-age group, it is acceptable for a child to be ahead of his or her same-age peers in math, for example, but behind them in reading, or social competence, or vice versa.

Research on social benefits indicates that children very early associate different expectations with different age groups. Experiments have shown that even a three-year-old, when shown pictures of older and younger children in hypothetical situations, will assign different kinds of behavior to an older child than to a younger child. For instance, younger children assign to older children instructive, leadership, helpful, and sympathizing roles, whereas older children assign to younger children the need for help and instruction. Thus in the mixed-age group, younger children perceive the older ones as being able to contribute something, and the older children see the younger ones as in need of their contributions. These mutually reinforcing perceptions create a climate of expected cooperation beneficial to the children, and to the teachers who otherwise feel they are doing all the giving.

Increasing the age range automatically increases the number of teachers available, for younger children particularly. One potential problem that may arise when children assume the role of teacher to other children is that some older children will give younger ones incorrect information, poor suggestions, or wrong advice. When teachers observe such interactions, they can benefit from learning where both children need additional help, and they can correct any misinformation that has been exchanged.

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Results of experiments in which children worked in groups of three, either in same-age or mixed-age groups, have shown that in the latter, older children spontaneously facilitated other children's behavior. In a single-age triad, on the other hand, the same children spontaneously became domineering and tended to engage in one-upmanship. When groups of children ranging in age from seven to nine years or from nine to eleven years were asked to make decisions, they went through the processes of reaching a consensus with far more organizing statements and more leadership behavior than children in same-age groups. When the same children dealt with identical kinds of tasks in same-age groups, there were more reports of bullying behavior. Other prosocial behaviors such as help-giving and sharing were more frequent in mixed-age groups. Turn taking was smoother, and there was greater social responsibility and sensitivity to others in mixed-age groups than in single-age groups (Chase & Doan, 1994).

Observations of four- and five-year-olds in a group found that when the teacher asked the older children who were not observing the class rules to remind the younger ones what the rules were, the older children's own "self-regulatory behavior" improved. The older children could become quite bossy, but the teacher has a responsibility to curb the children's bossiness in any group.

Social Participation

In a mixed-age group, younger children are capable of participating and contributing to far more complex activities than they could initiate if they were by themselves. Once the older ones set up the activity, the younger ones can participate, even if they could not have initiated it.

Research indicates that mixed-age groups can provide a therapeutic environment for children who are socially immature. Younger children will less quickly rebuff an older immature child than the child's same-age mates. Younger children will allow an older child to be unsophisticated longer than will his or her age peers (Katz et al., 1990).

Intellectual Benefits

Even four-year-olds spontaneously change the way they speak to suit the age of the listener. They change the length of the sentence, the tone, and the words they use. Studies of cognitive development suggest that cognitive conflict arises when interacting children are at different levels of understanding, regardless of their ages. If two children are working on a task that one understands well and another does not, the latter is likely to learn from the former if he or she understands the task very well, and if they argue. Only if one understands something very well can explanations be varied during argument (Katz et al., 1990).

Risks and Concerns

Every method of grouping children has risks. One concern with mixed-age grouping is ensuring that younger children are not overwhelmed by older or more competent ones. Teachers have an important role to play in maximizing the potential benefits of the age mixture by encouraging children to turn to each other for explanations, directions, and comfort. Teachers can also encourage older children to read stories to younger ones, and to listen to younger students read.

Teachers can also encourage older children to take responsibility for an individual younger child or for younger children in general. Teachers can encourage older children not to gloat over their superior skills, but to take satisfaction in their competence in reading to younger children, in writing things down for them, in explaining things, in showing them how to use the computer, in helping them find something, in helping them get dressed to go outdoors, and so forth.

Teachers can show older children how to protect themselves from being pestered by younger children, for example, by saying to the younger children, "I can't help you right this minute, but I will as soon as I finish what I am doing." Teachers can also help younger children learn to accept their own limitations and their place in the total scheme of things, as well as encourage older children to think of roles and suitable levels that younger ones could take in their work or in their activities. The basic expectation is that the children will be respectful and caring of one another (Lipsitz, 1995).

When teachers discourage older children from calling younger ones "cry babies" or "little dummies," they help resist the temptation of age stereotyping. Every once in a while one can observe a teacher saying to a misbehaving first grader something like "that behavior belongs in kindergarten." The teacher still will expect the first grader to be kind and helpful to the kindergartners during recess, though he or she has just heard kindergartners spoken of in a condescending way! A mixed-age group can provide a context in which to teach children not only to appreciate a level of understanding or behavior they themselves recently had, but also to appreciate their own progress and to develop a sense of the continuity of development.

For More Information

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